

## Broken

By Ramya Sampath

A month or so after my father died, my mother and I were cleaning up the black steel case cabinet that was stationed next to his bed for the preceding eight years. He was fiercely protective of his space and always of the bottom drawer of this cabinet. It never held anything very interesting, but somehow it felt to him like a last stand for his privacy, resistance to the way his whole life was on display out of medical necessity.

We felt curious and guilty rifling through his cabinet after he died, and mostly we were underwhelmed at what we found—lotion, medical tape, gauze, aspirin. But stashed under sundry papers and these medical supplies was a grocery bag full of broken, coffee-stained cups. My mother exclaimed: “There they are! I’ve been looking for these for months—we always run out of cups and I never knew why.” I remembered my mother telling me over the phone her favorite cup had broken mysteriously, and then one of our oldest plates, and then another small snack dish. She speculated my father would lose grip of the dishes when washing them or drop them while cleaning up. “This is why I always try to make him use plastic dishes, but he tells me I’m treating him like a child.” These small clashes were a stable fixture of their nearly 40-year marriage, alongside her famous vegetable *sambar*, a rich and tangy lentil stew my father loved until gradually he became less and less able to eat.

My mother would come home from work every day and ask him what he had eaten for lunch, and on days when he had felt too weak to eat a meal, he’d recount his previous night’s dinner. “Oh, I had rice and *sambar* with yogurt and pickle. It was delicious.” Yet careful inventory of the fridge would reveal undisturbed containers of leftovers and a table littered with cashew and cracker crumbs—an easier lunch to manage without the burdens of standing, mixing, reheating and carrying bowls. We tried stocking frozen meals, yet these would sit in the freezer covered in a thick layer of frost. We tried pre-preparing bowls of rice and stew for him and stashing them in the microwave, yet these too would sit uneaten.

When I would come to visit them every few months, I tried to lower the barriers to his eating by preparing his meals for him. But on days when he had no appetite, even my willing hands were inadequate, and instead I became a reluctantly deceptive ally in the long game of his well-being. There were days I would hide from my mother the paucity of his food intake while quietly slipping him the crunchy potassium-rich beans and nuts he was cautioned to avoid as a dialysis patient. I thought at least this would be kind of nourishment. “Don’t tell your mother,” he once cautioned me. “She just doesn’t understand I can’t always eat a whole meal. She cooks too much, I vomit, and then all the food goes to waste.”

But his daily coffee had always been non-negotiable. This one routine was more important to him than any other. When visiting, I would make coffee the way my parents do, with finely-

ground, smoky dark-roasted beans for pour-over and heated whole milk, an approximation of their beloved South Indian filter coffee. Their coffee is an art of exact proportions: one-third cup milk to two cup coffee decoction with ample sugar, resulting in a mocha-colored, thick, creamy brew. Invariably, there were times when I flubbed the proportions, and as light brown coffee-milk poured thinly across the counter, I would realize I had made two cardinal errors in preparing my father's coffee: too much dilution and too much volume overall. This *thanni* coffee, so diluted that my parents likened it to water in Tamil, was too thin to pair appropriately with biscuits and too voluminous for a volume-restricted diet such as my father's.

Whenever I accidentally made *thanni* coffee, I would preface its arrival to my father, exclaiming how watery it was, as though I was equally displeased by this as he would be. Partially this was my way of alerting him to lower his standards and spare me from the critique I knew the coffee deserved. But I was also lamenting depriving him of that day's daily pleasure—one of the few pleasures he had left toward the end of his life was the diurnal rhythm of coffee drinking. That interval between 7:30 AM and 4:30 PM seemed to widen as the activities filling this time shrank and as his need for rest grew.

I would supplement the bad coffee with extra snacks, making up for this lost pleasure with other gustatory perks—I wouldn't be too exacting with his potassium or phosphorous restrictions that day. And when I flew in during the last week of his life, I knew he was in bad shape when he wasn't able to wake up for the morning coffee I made him and when his afternoon cup sat untouched, milky and grey hours later. When I asked him if it didn't come out quite right, if he wanted a fresh cup brought to him, he weakly replied “No, I could have drunk it if I wanted to—I just didn't feel like it.”

There were many falls my parents hid from me as well. Once when they picked me up from the airport, I remarked on my father's unusual clothing choice of a bulky sweatshirt that seemed to suspiciously cover one immobile arm. When I asked him about it, his eyes darted to my mother, whose eyes were firmly fixed on the road. He dismissed it summarily, claiming “Oh, I just banged it against something, and it's a little sore.” My mother quickly revealed “No, he tripped over the cord of his fan and broke his wrist. We went to the hospital last week. He just didn't want you to worry.”

In these ways, my parents and I lovingly shielded each other from the extent of my father's physical decline that led him to eat less, fall more and break not only household objects, but also his own bones. And my father was ever careful to only report to us the incidents that would least compromise his independence.

Standing there, holding those shards from the black steel case cabinet, my mother and I pieced together the sequence of his own precarious morning coffee routine, standing propped up by his walker, pouring boiling water into the drip filter cone, walk-rolling back to his table while navigating the obstacle course of medical supply boxes with his swollen belly that propelled him forward and down. We imagined him bending to clean up the sugary-thick coffee spills, picking up the broken pieces one by one, unsteadily and breathlessly collecting them into the bag. I imagined his thought process—that if he stored the shards in his cabinet, my mother

wouldn't find them in the trash when she came home, wouldn't question him about what happened, wouldn't demand he give up his precious coffee ritual for his own safety. Perhaps later, he may have thought to himself, when he had the energy, he could carefully wheel himself to the trash bin outside and bury the evidence under browned banana peels and plastic, where she wouldn't go digging. As my mother and I held the pieces of the broken cups together, tears streamed down our faces as we gradually understood my father's final attempts to hide his frailty.

There were moments in his last stay in the ICU, when even under the extensive sedation and analgesia that enabled him to tolerate intubation, he would weakly fight the nurse changing his catheter by trying to close his gown. Despite his clenched eyes and his incapable voice, his eyebrows and hands conveyed his sense of defiance, his intense need for physical privacy fighting against even the strongest medications. The medical team took this as evidence he wasn't sedated enough.

During his last two days, he defecated in his bed, soiling his linens. This had never happened to him before, throughout all of his medical struggles. Somehow, even with frequent bouts of diarrhea in his last months of life, he always managed to hobble quickly to the bathroom, making it in time. He was so insistent and private about his bodily functions he resisted the idea of having a bedpan or bedside commode when it was surely the safest option. And he had always been resistant to letting my mother come into the bathroom to help him up when he fell at our home. Watching the nurse change his sheets in the ICU, my mother and I felt a bittersweet relief he would never have to know someone had to clean up after him.

My mother and I found in the broken coffee cups a potent reminder of my father's fierce need for privacy, autonomy, and dignity in the face of a life exposed. He had succeeded in keeping the cups secret until he was gone, and I felt ashamed at betraying his privacy by holding the porcelain evidence of his fragility. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away; they were never for me to find.

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**Ramya Sampath is a medical student at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry whose interests include global health and social medicine, medical education and creative nonfiction. She was a 2017-2018 Fulbright-Nehru Fellow in India, conducting ethnographic fieldwork on community-based palliative care. Prior to her work in medicine, she collaborated with playwrights, public health experts and historians at universities in Egypt and the United States to improve She studied Sociocultural Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Her creative work has been featured in *JAMA* and *The Lancet*.**

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